**Accurate Transmission of the New Testament Text**

*by: Harry Osborne*

Can we be sure that the inspired words of the original text were accurately transmitted to be the words found in our Bibles today? Skeptics often point out the fact that we have none of the autograph books making up the Bible. So, how can we have confidence that our Bible today has the same inspired message that was delivered to the original writers? The short answer is that we must examine the Bible the same way we examine other books regarding the accuracy of transmission. In this article, we will begin to examine the New Testament books for evidence regarding the accuracy of their transmission.

Consider the fact that we have none of the autograph works of William Shakespeare, yet his plays are taught in schools without question as to the authenticity of their textual transmission. Those works are about 400 years old, much less than the age of the New Testament books. Yet, of the 37 surviving plays of Shakespeare, there are about 100 or more texts in each of those plays still disputed by scholars as to the original words used – many of those cases materially affecting the meaning of each passage. However, more than 1900 years after the original writing of the New Testament, there is a general consensus of scholarship on the original text of all but 10 to 20 verses. Of that number, none of the differences related to textual content would affect even one doctrine or critical fact of the gospel.

How can we be so sure of the accurate transmission of the New Testament text? A major factor has to do with the number of pieces of evidence to help establish that text. When one considers the evidence for the New Testament text in contrast to the text for other works on antiquity, the difference is striking. The chart below gives the facts comparing the number of extant manuscripts and the time gap between the original writers and the oldest manuscripts for these ancient works:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **AUTHOR** | **BOOK** | **DATE**  **WRITTEN** | **EARLIEST**  **COPIES** | **TIME GAP** | **NUMBER of COPIES** |
| Homer | ***Iliad*** | 800 B.C. | c. 400 B.C. | c. 400 yrs. | 643 |
| Herodotus | ***History*** | 480-425 B.C. | c. A.D. 900 | c. 1350 yrs. | 8 |
| Thucydides | ***History*** | 460-400 B.C. | c. A.D. 900 | c. 1300 yrs. | 8 |
| Plato |  | 400 B.C. | c. A.D. 900 | c. 1300 yrs. | 7 |
| Demosthenes |  | 300 B.C. | c. A.D. 1100 | c. 1400 yrs. | 200 |
| Caesar | ***Gallic Wars*** | 100-44 B.C. | c. A.D. 900 | c. 1000 yrs. | 10 |
| Livy | ***History of Rome*** | 59 B.C. – A.D. 17 | 4th cent. (partial)  mostly 10th cent. | c. 400 yrs.  c. 1000 yrs. | 1 partial  19 copies |
| Tacitus | ***Annals*** | A.D. 100 | c. A.D. 1100 | c. 1000 yrs. | 20 |
| Pliny Secundus | ***Natural History*** | A.D. 61-113 | c. A.D. 850 | c. 750 yrs. | 7 |
| Inspired Writers | ***New Testament*** | A.D. 50-96 | c. 114 (fragment)  c. 200 (books)  c. 250 (most of NT)  c. 325 (complete NT) | 25-50 yrs.  100 yrs.  150 yrs.  225 yrs. | 5686 - Greek  19,284 - Other languages  **24,970**+ Total |

Taken from *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* by Josh McDowell (p. 38)

In his excellent work, *The New Testament Document*, F. F. Bruce made these observations based on the above evidence:

Perhaps we can appreciate how wealthy the New Testament is in manuscript attestation if we compare the textual material for other ancient historical works. For Caesar's *Gallic War* (composed between 58 and 50 BC) there are several extant MSS, but only nine or ten are good, and the oldest is some 900 years later than Caesar's day. Of the 142 books of the Roman History of Livy (59 BC-AD 17) only thirty five survive; these are known to us from not more than twenty MSS of any consequence, only one of which, and that containing fragments of Books iii-vi, is as old as the fourth century. Of the fourteen books of the *Histories* of Tacitus (c. AD 100) only four and a half survive; of the sixteen books of his *Annals,* ten survive in full and two in part. The text of these extant portions of his two great historical works depends entirely on two MSS, one of the ninth century and one of the eleventh. The extant MSS of his minor works *(Dialogue dc Oratoribus, Agricola, Gcrmania)* all descend from a codex of the tenth century The History of Thucydides (c. 460-400 BC) is known to us from eight MSS, the earliest belonging to c. AD 900, and a few papyrus scraps, belonging to about the beginning of the Christian era The same is true of the History of Herodotus (c. 488-428 BC). Yet no classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest MSS of their works which are of any use to us are over 1,300 years later than the originals (pp. 16-17).

While the manuscript evidence of the New Testament text is daunting considered alone, it does not come close to exhausting the evidence for that text. Below is a chart showing the number of quotations of the New Testament text contained in the works of a few early “patristic writers” further attesting to the content, distribution and availability of the New Testament text:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Writer & Known Dates (A.D.)** | **Gospels** | **Acts** | **Epistles of Paul** | **General Epistles** | **Revelation** | **Totals** |
| *Justin Martyr* (converted 130 – martyred 165) | 268 | 10 | 43 | 6 | 3  266 allusions | 330 |
| *Irenaeus* (born 115-202?) | 1038 | 194 | 499 | 23 | 65 | 1,819 |
| *Clement of Alex.* (150-215) | 1107 | 44 | 1127 | 207 | 11 | 2,406 |
| *Origen* (185-254) | 9231 | 349 | 7778 | 399 | 165 | 17,992 |
| *Tertullian* (140-230) | 3822 | 502 | 2609 | 120 | 205 | 7,258 |
| *Hippolytus* (160-225) | 734 | 42 | 387 | 27 | 188 | 1,378 |
| *Eusebius* (263-340) | 3258 | 211 | 1592 | 88 | 27 | 5,176 |
| **Grand Totals** | **19,368** | **1,352** | **14,035** | **870** | **664** | **36,289** |

Edited from *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* by Josh McDowell (p. 43) with added material by HRO

Based on the evidence from these Anti-Nicean (pre-AD 325) patristic writings, Sir David Dalrymple embarked upon an extensive search of these works and found that all but 11 verses in the New Testament are quoted in them (see citation by Charles Leach in *Our Bible: How We Got It*, pp. 35-36). Furthermore, the above list of early patristic writings does not exhaust the New Testament citations from this period. Ignatius (A.D. 70-110) quoted extensively from Matthew, John, Acts, Romans, 1st Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1st & 2nd Thessalonians, 1st & 2nd Timothy, James and 1st Peter. Polycarp (70-156), a disciple of the apostle John, also referred to New Testament passages in his known works. Cyprian, who died in A.D. 258, cited New Testament passages about 1030 times in his writings.

The facts are compelling! No document from antiquity to modern times has even close to the evidence for its accurate transmission to the present as does the New Testament. If we cannot have confidence in the reliability of its transmission, we cannot establish the text of any work in history. Yes, we can have a firm assurance that we have the message delivered to the inspired writers of the New Testament! There can be no reasonable doubt about it.